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Natural interest in Nature

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We often express concern over the fact that our children are being bred on cobblestones and asphalt pavements and are losing or have lost the "feel" of the "dirt" and grass. In fact many fear that the children, and consequently the adults who have grown up from such childhood backgrounds, can no longer enjoy that interest in nature so pronounced among the members of the past generations and so vital for the realization of the "full life." Considering this fear, an experience enjoyed by the writer this summer may prove as refreshing to the readers as it did to him.

The summer was spent in a colony on the shores of one of the most beautiful lakes in the Catskills. Since the season of 1926 the children and the older folks who have been permanent summer residents there, have walked the forest paths, climbed over the rocks, trodden relentlessly on whatever plants happened to grow in their paths, gathered and frequently killed salamanders, toads, snakes and other animals, caught snapping turtles and handled them in ways only the uninitiated would do, and in general lived a life of total disregard for the values, beauties and even dangers of the region. The only flowers they knew were the daisy and the buttercup. The only trees they knew were the pine trees—every conifer was, of course, a pine—and the trees with "leaves." Salamanders were lizards. Copperhead snakes were reputed to be in the neighborhood, but so many years had elapsed since one was seen or killed, that they were relegated to the limbo of legend and folk lore. The habits attributed to snapping turtles were merely stories to frighten or charm children, but not to be taken seriously by an adult. In fact all turtles were alike and the designation of "snapping turtle," which was the only specific name ever used, was largely

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for anecdotal purposes or to designate the large turtles from the small. Such was the extent of their nature knowledge.

Having some time to devote to an interesting experiment, the writer suggested to several members of the community that daily nature walks be organized where a bit of the rich natural history of the section would be explained to all interested. No motive other than that of learning the environment was offered as an incentive. The proposal was accepted with alacrity by almost everyone in the colony, young and old. So each fair morning at eleven o'clock the group gathered for the daily jaunt. There were little tots of five, children from eight to sixteen, and mothers of families. In some cases the women arose an hour earlier than usual each day, in order that they might cook their mid-day meal in time to join the "hikers." All were enthusiastic and vied with each other for the honor of the greatest accumulation of natural history information.

Our trips were short and varied. Some days we hardly advanced more than a few feet, for the story of a chestnut tree or the tale of the deadly "Destroying Angel"—a toadstool—or the recounting of the beautiful legend concerning the Indian Pipe or Corpse Plant, made the hour and a half pass so quickly that we had to return home before we had advanced at all. Other days we spent in searching in a shale bed for other rock forms, perchance a fossil, or a stray bit of quartz left there by the glacier. One session was spent on a trip in row boats to a lake which adjoined ours, where we hoped to find forms of fresh water and bog life. Our booty when the excursion was over that day and notes were compared, consisted of a tiny painted turtle, a number of kinds of water insects, a water snake, a small sun fish captured in a net with the help of cracker dust, and about forty kinds of bog plants including a beautiful clump of pitcher plant with its long-peduncled, lemon-colored blossom. When a visitor came to the colony, he would be escorted over some of the ground already covered by one of the group, who explained enthusiastically objects of which all had been ignorant only a few weeks before.

Before long the region began to take on a new meaning to our colonists. No longer did they pull armfuls of club moss for an evening's decoration, or cut mountain laurel bushes to adorn a bare corner of a porch. They circumspectly stepped on the

greensward and avoided treading on the Wake Robin when ambling through the woods. A clump of poison ivy, for two seasons nurtured by one of the settlers near a beautiful young white pine at the corner of his house, was properly dug up and disposed of. Shelving rock shelters were approached with diffidence lest a lurking rattler should be disturbed. The gray birch was no longer girdled in an effort to slice large slabs of bark for various uses. One lady, who gathered mushrooms frequently, became aware for the first time of the vast number of imposters parading under the guise of an innocent "mushroom." One youngster, eleven years of age, who had been coming to the colony since he was three, told his father one weekend, "For the first time my eyes are open to the wonders of this place. To think how blind I have been all these years!"

From these daily trips there developed two outgrowths. Several members suggested the value of permanent labels along the trails we had been following. The natural result was a Nature Trail. Different individuals undertook the duty of learning and concisely describing on small placards the specific objects of interest along the way. These brief legends were then printed with black India ink on white enameled boards, and, after being shel-laced to assure the weather-proofing, were placed on or near the items described. This might have been a tree, a flower, a rock, a puff-ball or any other thing along the way.

Then one member suggested that it would be worth while to gather different types of mosses and place them side by side in a permanent collection so that all could see the differences and learn to distinguish them more readily in the field. Out of this thought grew a museum. The corporation that built the colony turned over for our use a small building about ten feet by ten, formerly used as an office. Here we collected about twenty kinds of mosses, appropriately labelled, and arranged in conditions as closely approximating their natural habitats as possible, such as on rocks, rotten stumps, fertile soil, and in water. Different kinds of ferns were pressed, mounted and hung on the walls side by side. The same was done to flowers, tree leaves, those fungi that could last without rotting, rocks, and as many different natural objects as time and space permitted. One of the members brought a large aquarium which was stocked with plants and animals found in the lake. A few

cages were constructed in which frogs, toads, salamanders and snakes were exhibited. Toward the end of the season collections were made by the children of the colony, of leaf prints of various trees, flowers and grasses on blue print paper manufactured by the children themselves. Plaster casts of leaves were also made and colored with water color paint. Thus from a desire to study the fauna, flora and physiography of the region there evolved a manipulative desire as a result of which most of the group not only learned their local natural history but made and took home with them items of interest based upon their nature study.

The writer no longer will fear the loss of an inherent interest in nature study on the part of city children and city-bred adults. Let us try in every way within our power to bring nature to our city youth, artificial as those situations and presentations may be, and we may feel secure in the knowledge that when those young people, by some happy combinations of circumstances, find themselves in the woods, fields and meadows, they will respond to the call of Mother Nature with that zest so characteristic of those whose ingrained desires have been consistently repressed.

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